

Reno "Live Trap" Loaning Program

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ABSTRACT: A Live Trap Loaning Program has evolved to address urban wildlife problems in Reno, Nevada. The program, operated by USDA Wildlife Services, has responded to the public's need to address urban wildlife problems in the absence of an active Wildlife Services specialist in this urban area. The species for which most of the live traps (cage or enclosed) have been requested, since the program's initiation in FY 1992, are California ground squirrels, raccoons, and striped skunks. We discuss information transfer and educational components of this program, which convey to the public information on the biology of target species, proper handling of non-target catches, handouts, and options available for resolving their wildlife problems.

KEY WORDS: cage traps, ground squirrels, *Marmota flaviventris*, *Mephitis mephitis*, Nevada, non-target catches, *Procyon lotor*, public education, raccoon, *Spermophilus beecheyi*, striped skunk, trap baits, trap loan program, yellow-bellied marmot

Proc. 22nd Vertebr. Pest Conf. (R. M. Timm and J. M. O'Brien, Eds.)
Published at Univ. of Calif., Davis. 2006. Pp. 402-405.

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, both urban and suburban residents of Reno, Nevada and nearby communities have experienced increasing conflicts with certain wildlife species, including carnivores, rodents, and birds. Such conflicts include damage to landscaping and other resources, including general property damage, loss of pet food, and in some cases predation on pets. Proximity of wildlife to humans and their dwellings and pets create various health and safety issues, because of the potential occurrence of diseases such as rabies, distemper, hepatitis, plague, and parasitic infections such as raccoon roundworm.

The USDA Wildlife Services (WS) program in Nevada has a history of providing equipment for loan to landowners for such problems as geese in alfalfa fields. Under the terms of WS policy, "equipment and non-pesticide materials may be made available to the public for demonstration purposes, temporary loan, or purchases" (USDA 2003). The demand for information, assistance, and equipment has increased in recent times as both the human population and some wildlife populations in the area have grown. Initially, the trap loan program in the Reno area began as a response to increased complaints concerning skunks and ground squirrels received by Wildlife Services. In Fiscal Year (FY) 1992, its first year of operation, the program loaned out a total of 56 traps for striped skunks (*Mephitis mephitis*) and 34 traps for California ground squirrels (*Spermophilus beecheyi*). For FY 2004, 153 traps were loaned out for raccoons (*Procyon lotor*), 129 for California ground squirrels, and 60 for striped skunks. To a lesser degree, live traps have also been loaned to individuals seeking to solve problems caused by yellow-bellied marmots, cottontails (*Sylvilagus nuttalli*), jackrabbits (*Lepus* spp.), feral cats (*Felis domesticus*), pigeons (*Columba livia*), rats (*Rattus* spp.), coyotes (*Canis latrans*), and several other species. However, this paper will deal primarily with the trap loan program's efforts in helping solve problems with the 3 above-mentioned most frequent problem species.

FACTORS IN THE PROGRAM'S SUCCESS

Availability of the trap loan program, and the species for which traps can be effective, must be made known to potential users. This has been accomplished by use of cooperating agencies and by individuals. Agencies that have been integral to this process include the Nevada Department of Wildlife (NDOW), the Nevada Department of Agriculture, Washoe County and Reno Animal Control, the Nevada Humane Society, the University of Nevada, the Washoe County Health Department, and various homeowners associations.

A central location "clearing house" for receiving and directing requests for assistance was established in the form of a phone number at the Wildlife Services office in Reno. This phone line is staffed during working hours Monday through Friday by personnel trained in fielding wildlife damage complaints and questions, and capable of referring the caller to other resources as appropriate. Outside of working hours, an answering machine records all messages for subsequent review and referral or response, as appropriate. The staff person initially receiving the calls follows an informal decision tree process that directs the caller to appropriate resources, based on the type of complaint. In general, the call will be directed to someone who can inform the caller of the array of potential alternatives available for the specific wildlife conflict. If the staff person initially receiving the call determines that the situation represents an imminent health and safety hazard, the call is promptly referred to the appropriate WS District Supervisor, who in turn assigns an available wildlife specialist to respond. In some such instances, the local public health department may be called into the situation.

In evaluating the type of problem and its seriousness, the staff person initially receiving the call often asks the caller for more specifics regarding their problem situation. In most instances, the caller will know the type of animal responsible for the damage or causing the conflict. However, there are a number of cases in which the caller is not sure of what species of wildlife is

involved. Typical questions asked, in an attempt to better define the problem, include the following: Is this problem animal active in the daytime, or at night? Is there scat (droppings) present, and if so, is it round like a marble, or elongated? Are there tracks present, and what size and shape? Do the track show nail marks (i.e., dog-like), or is there no evidence of nail marks (i.e., cat-like)? This questioning and decision-making process can be aided by use of *A Field Guide to Mammal Tracking in North America* (Halfpenny 1986:129-132).

Suggestions or recommendations discussed with the caller are tailored to meet the needs of each individual situation. Recommendations can be as simple as removing any uneaten pet food left outdoors before nightfall, keeping the pet food supply in an inaccessible place, or disposing of household refuse in a timely and appropriate fashion. People are instructed to not feed wildlife. If appropriate for the situation, the implementation of exclusion fences, either electric or conventional, may be recommended for consideration.

The caller is questioned as to the type of control efforts they may have already attempted, and why they apparently failed or succeeded. If the animal judged responsible for the conflict is a species that can be cage-trapped, the following questions are posed to the caller:

- Have you called any private enterprises (nuisance wildlife control operators) that specialize in solving urban wildlife problems?

- Have you explored the possibility of buying a trap and handling the problem yourself?
- Do you know someone whom you trust that could handle this problem for you?

If the caller chooses to borrow a cage trap from WS, they are given basic information regarding the trap loan program and are given instructions on how to get to the location of the Reno Wildlife Services Office, along with the office's hours of operation.

Borrowing a trap from the WS office is much the same as checking out a book from the public library. The only requirements are that the individual have a valid Nevada driver's license and be willing to fill out a "Form 24" (Figure 1). The cooperator then has a 2-week period from time of check-out to use the equipment and return it to the office. Extensions beyond this 2-week period can be requested by telephone and may be granted on a case-by-case basis, taking into consideration the current demand for traps.

Most of the traps available for loan are Tomahawk-type wire mesh cage traps, in sizes appropriate for the most common pest species (ground squirrel, raccoon, and rabbit). The trap available for capture of skunks is an enclosed trap with a guillotine-type drop door (Stendal Products, Bellingham, WA), which has a trigger baited in such a way that the animal pulls on the bait object, releasing the drop door and thus containing the skunk within the trap.

UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE ANIMAL AND PLANT HEALTH INSPECTION SERVICE WILDLIFE SERVICES				OFFICE ADDRESS (Stamp)		
TEMPORARY ASSIGNMENT OF GOVERNMENT PROPERTY TO PRIVATE INDIVIDUALS				USDA APHIS Wildlife Services 8775 Technology Way Reno, NV 89521 775/851-4848		
The equipment listed below is temporarily assigned to the cooperator whose signature is affixed below for the purpose of controlling nuisance animals. The cooperator has received instruction on its proper use and accepts full responsibility for the safe and lawful operation of the equipment and agrees to release the Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service, or their designated agents, from any liability for personal injury, injury to others, or property damage arising from the operation and use of the assigned equipment or from any animals captured. The assigned equipment will be returned on or before the date listed below unless other arrangements have been made. Should the equipment be damaged, lost, or stolen, it will be replaced by the cooperator or reimbursement made at the value listed below.						
NUMBER OF ITEMS	TYPE OF EQUIPMENT	PROPERTY NUMBER	VALUE	CONDITION	TARGET SPECIES	DATE TO BE RETURNED
1	Live Trap		\$	Good		/ /
			\$			/ /
			\$			/ /
			\$			/ /
WS REPRESENTATIVE'S SIGNATURE				COOPERATOR'S NAME		DATE
						/ /
				COOPERATOR'S SIGNATURE		
				X		
ADDRESS (Street, City, State, and Zip Code)				ADDRESS (Street)		
8775 Technology Way Reno, NV 89521						
PHONE NUMBER (Include Area Code)				CITY	STATE	ZIP CODE
(775) 851-4848						
WS FORM 24 (JULY 88)				PHONE NUMBER (Include Area Code)		
				{ }		

PART 1 - WS OFFICE COPY

Figure 1. Wildlife Services Form 24.

TRAPPING TECHNIQUES

The cooperator is given brief but thorough instructions for setting and monitoring the trap, as well as instruction on proper ways of handling a captured animal.

Trap Placement

Place the trap in a crawl space, on a deck, or another such area where animal activity has been noted. When an access hole is found (e.g., into a crawl space, or underneath steps or a mobile home), set the trap in front of this opening, with boards or other materials on each side to guide the target animal into the trap. To avoid catching a non-target skunk, in many cases it is possible to elevate the trap 5 inches off the ground, as skunks will not climb into an elevated trap. When target animals are traveling along a fence, along the side of a building, or through a narrow space between obstacles, it is very useful to add some type of "wings" to funnel or steer the animal into the trap. Such materials can be an existing fence on one side, plywood boards or scrap lumber, poultry netting, or even cardboard.

Baits

Fish is the most successful bait for many species of small carnivores, and a perforated can of water-based tuna is highly recommended. For the Tomahawk-type traps, the bait should be placed on the floor of the trap beyond the pan or tripping mechanism, where it can be secured to the floor by means of wire, if necessary. Alternatively, it can be suspended at the rear of the trap by use of a shower curtain ring or "S" hook. In many instances, a mesh material such as a hair net, nylon hosiery, or a plastic mesh fruit wrapping from the grocery store can be used to hang bait material on the "S" hook. For the skunk traps, the bait is attached to the trigger in a way that causes the skunk to pull the trigger, dropping the cage door.

If feral or house cats are present in the area, it is preferable to use a bait that is attractive only to the target species and not to cats. For example, to attract and capture a raccoon, use marshmallows with a drop or two of vanilla extract, instead of tuna fish. Peanut butter in an upside-down jar lid wired to the cage floor just beyond the release pan, with bird seed sprinkled on top, works well on ground squirrels. Cabbage or lettuce is an excellent bait for marmots just coming out of their winter slumber, used at the time of year when no other green vegetation is available.

Published Guides to Common Problem Species

Single-sheet WS informational flyers are provided to individuals who borrow traps or who come into the WS office seeking information. We keep in stock the individual flyers that cover raccoons and skunks (see USDA 2005a,b), and we reprint a multi-page guide on ground squirrel control for distribution (see Askham 1994). Each informational handout contains a general description of the species, covers its biology, and describes typical damage as well as the diseases it may carry. It outlines options and recommendations for preventing conflicts, and it gives instructions for conducting control activities. The final paragraph of the two WS fliers details the legal

status of the species, as currently determined by the Nevada Division of Wildlife (NDOW), and points out the state regulations pertaining to dealing with taking individuals of this species.

None of the species for which traps are loaned are threatened or endangered. Some may have the furbearer status and be covered under state fur harvest regulations, as is the case for raccoons. Ground squirrels, coyotes, and skunks are "unprotected" mammals and can be taken any time by approved methods. NDOW prohibits the relocation of skunks, coyotes, and any other wildlife without written permission of the Department. If clients need clarification on the legal status of a species or legal means of take, we ask them to contact the NDOW.

Common Trapping Problems

The most common difficulty is the capture of non-target animals, especially skunks. Many such skunk captures are made by persons using cage traps that have been set to capture rodents (e.g., ground squirrels) or feral cats. This occurs frequently, and many of our calls are from people other than ones who borrowed WS traps. The best solution to a non-target skunk capture is to cover the trap with a disposable blanket, such as a piece of dark canvas, or a dark-colored plastic tarp. Once enclosed in a darkened space, the cage can often be gently lifted and placed into a pickup truck and transported to a place where the animal can be humanely euthanized (Wilhite 2005). There are, of course, no guarantees that you will not get sprayed.

Cooperators borrowing traps are responsible for disposition of the trapped animal. We recommend to cooperators that shooting the animal in the brain is a humane method of euthanasia, and we stress the importance of the cooperator's contacting their local authorities, prior to initiating trapping, to become aware of any local restrictions on the use of firearms.

INTERNAL LOGISTICS OF THE TRAP LOAN PROGRAM

The establishment of an inventory of traps was the necessary first step in establishing the program. Special project funding that focused on rodents (e.g., yellow-bellied marmots, and ground squirrels) provided the means to increase trap inventories in certain sizes. The growing inventory of available traps has been accomplished over time, due to the foresight of the various State Directors of the Nevada WS program over time.

When trap demand has been high, a waiting list was established, and this has been useful as a justification for ordering additional equipment to fill increasing demands on the program. This strategy was applied for ground squirrels during the peak summer demand period.

PROGRAM PROBLEMS

The main problem encountered has been the failure of individuals to return traps that have been loaned out. This can be problematic, potential trap loss could be a justification for the establishment of a loan fee or deposit, although we have not established a fee or deposit in our program thus far.

When an individual is delinquent in returning a trap, a

phone call is the first action taken in order to attempt to recover the loaned equipment. If a phone call gets no results, a letter is written to the cooperator. The letter usually will elicit a response. If no response to the letter is received, a personal visit to the location may help. Overall, there are still a 6-8% of the all loaned traps that are never recovered. There are many reasons for the non-recovery of traps, but most center on plain negligence on the part of the borrower. In instances where the borrower does not respond to a phone call or letter, it is not unusual to find the borrower has moved away and cannot be contacted.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I thank the citizens of Nevada who bring back traps on time, as they contribute to the program's success; the organizations that contribute to the "hotline"; and our WS office staff (without which the program would not be viable). Special recognition is due the Nevada Wildlife Services' State Directors, both past and present, who have devoted resources and time to keep this program functioning.

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